



Performing Authenticity in the Age of Feeds: Irony, Conspiracy, and the Fragmented Self in Lauren Oyler's *Fake Accounts*

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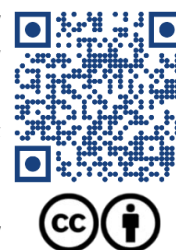
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Abstract— *Lauren Oyler's Fake Accounts (2021) offers a sharp metafictional exploration of digital subjectivity, irony fatigue, and the commodification of authenticity in the age of social media. The unnamed narrator discovers that her boyfriend, Felix, secretly operates a popular conspiracy-theory Instagram account. This revelation triggers a meditation on deception—both interpersonal and epistemic—within a culture dominated by feeds, curated identities, and algorithmic visibility. This paper argues that Fake Accounts stages authenticity as performance. The narrator's hyper-analytic voice, oscillating between detachment and vulnerability, reflects a generational condition marked by skepticism toward sincerity and exhaustion with ideological spectacle. Social media platforms function as laboratories of self-construction, where political belief, aesthetic identity, and moral stance are constantly curated, revised, and monetized. In this environment, conspiracy thinking and ironic self-awareness coexist uneasily, each feeding on the instability of truth in networked culture. Drawing on theories of postmodern subjectivity and digital self-fashioning from Erving Goffman, Jean Baudrillard, and Sherry Turkle, the study contends that the novel's fragmented, essayistic structure mirrors the discontinuous temporality of scrolling and posting. The narrator's relentless commentary functions as both critique and symptom: her refusal of emotional transparency serves as a defense against a world in which exposure is routine and attention is currency. The proliferation of "fake accounts" signals not only literal online deception but the broader condition of mediated identity, where sincerity is suspect and selfhood is perpetually provisional. Ultimately, this paper positions Fake Accounts as a novel of platform modernity, capturing the psychological texture of life lived online. By interrogating the instability of truth, intimacy, and belief in a hyperconnected era, Oyler's work reveals how digital culture reshapes not only public discourse but the inner architecture of the self.*



Keywords— *digital subjectivity, platform modernity, authenticity as performance, irony fatigue, conspiracy thinking, fragmented self, metafiction, social media deception*

I. INTRODUCTION

In the winter of 2016–17, as Donald Trump prepared to take the oath of office amid political upheaval, a young woman in Brooklyn snooped through her boyfriend's phone and uncovered a secret far more unsettling than typical infidelity. Her boyfriend, Felix, was the anonymous curator of a popular Instagram account dedicated to conspiracy theories, including chemtrails, 9/11 inside jobs, and shadowy global cabals. The revelation arrives not as an

emotional catastrophe but as strange vindication for the unnamed narrator of Lauren Oyler's *Fake Accounts* (2021). She had already grown weary of the relationship; Felix's offline detachment now found its perfect digital mirror in his hyper-engaged online persona. What follows is no conventional breakup narrative but a spiraling, essayistic inquiry into the nature of deception in an era when every self is, to some degree, a fake account.

Oyler's debut novel arrives at a pivotal cultural moment when literary representations of digital life shifted from novelty to necessity. Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This*, published the same month, fragments its prose to mimic the slipstream chaos of the feed. Oyler, by contrast, refuses to reproduce the internet's staccato texture. Her sentences are long, looping, and deliberately essayistic—dense with qualifications, revisions, and self-interrogations that stand in deliberate opposition to the rapid rhythm of tweets, Stories, and algorithmic scrolls. Yet the novel's form is no less diagnostic. By staging authenticity as performance, Oyler captures Sherry Turkle's "alone together" paradox: hyper-connectivity that deepens isolation and perpetual visibility that erodes interiority (Turkle, 2011).

The thesis of this paper is that *Fake Accounts* performs authenticity as an impossible yet compulsory labor in the age of feeds. The narrator's hyper-analytic voice—alternately lacerating toward others and self-excoriating—embodies the generational condition that Erving Goffman would recognize as advanced impression management, now accelerated by algorithmic incentives (Goffman, 1959). Conspiracy and irony, far from opposites, become twin strategies for navigating epistemic instability. The novel's fragmented, metafictional structure does not merely describe this condition; it enacts it, forcing readers to confront the discontinuous temporality that governs life online. In doing so, Oyler produces not autofiction's usual solipsism but a rigorous anatomy of platform subjectivity.

The plot unfolds as follows: after discovering Felix's secret account, the narrator attends the Women's March in Washington, D.C., intending to end the relationship. Instead, she learns of his death in a cycling accident. Grief—or its performance—propels her to quit her job writing feminist-adjacent hot takes for a Vice-like website and flee to Berlin, where she first met Felix. There, she babysits for an expat family while lying about being an accountant, dates aggressively via apps using fabricated zodiac-based personas, and constructs provisional identities. A late twist reveals that Felix faked his death as "performance art," confirming that even mortality can be curated (Oyler, 2021).

This paper proceeds in four sections. The first examines the opening act of interpersonal deception and its entanglement with digital conspiracy as an epistemic mirror. The second explores irony fatigue as both symptom and defense. The third analyzes the Berlin sequences as laboratories of the provisional self. The fourth considers the novel's essayistic form as mimetic of feed temporality. Theoretical scaffolding from Goffman's dramaturgical analysis, Baudrillard's simulacra, and Turkle's digital

intimacy illuminates how Oyler transforms personal anecdote into cultural diagnosis.

II. THE DISCOVERY: DECEPTION AS EPISTEMIC MIRROR

The novel opens with the phone-snooping scene rendered in the narrator's signature long-form interiority. Searching Felix's phone while he sleeps, she discovers the account, which has tens of thousands of followers and hundreds of comments praising its "truth-telling." Instead of outrage, she feels "suddenly, magically free" and liberated from untangling his motivations (Oyler, 2021). Felix's Instagram account—anonymous yet highly engaged and devoted to conspiracies he does not appear to believe offline—functions as a perfect emblem of Jean Baudrillard's precession of simulacra. The content is not rooted in genuine belief but is a hyperreal performance engineered for algorithmic reward: likes, shares, and virality. "Simulation is no longer that of a territory... It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 1).

This moment crystallizes the novel's central insight: deception is no longer exceptional but structural. In Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical model, social life consists of front-stage performances and back-stage preparations. Social media collapses these stages. Felix's account is pure front-stage spectacle, engineered for an audience he never meets. The narrator's own life—her job repackaging news into outrage cycles and her carefully calibrated tweets—operates under the same logic. She reflects that the things she said online felt like performances, rehearsed, and modified over time for maximum impact, while offline she was barely saying anything at all (Oyler, 2021).

Felix does not promote delusions out of conviction; the narrator infers he does so to prove a point about gullibility. Oyler refuses to pathologize believers, locating pathology instead in platform incentives that reward extremity. Belief becomes optional; virality is mandatory. The narrator's skepticism toward Felix, the "Resistance," and sincerity mirrors this logic. Irony and conspiracy thinking are dialectical partners thriving on eroded epistemic ground. Trump's inauguration looms like a cultural weather event. At the Women's March, the narrator observes pink pussy hats and Princess Leia signs with acidic detachment, noting how the resistance arose because it was a feature of Star Wars (Oyler, 2021). Every gesture feels pre-mediated and optimized for the feed.

The snooping itself is performative; the narrator justifies it as righteous curiosity. This mirrors the broader digital condition where privacy is illusory and mutual surveillance normalized. Baudrillard's hyperreality

explains the hollowness of the conspiracies: they are copies without originals (Baudrillard, 1994). The discovery licenses her desire to leave and foreshadows her Berlin experiments, where deception becomes self-reinvention. Critics highlight the scene's timeliness in capturing the post-2016 epistemic crisis (Rosenfield, 2021). The narrator's blogging job is structurally identical to Felix's account: both monetize outrage. Thus, the discovery establishes deception as the governing metaphor for platform subjectivity, where truth is secondary to visibility.

III. IRONY FATIGUE AND THE EXHAUSTION OF SPECTACLE

The narrator's voice is the novel's greatest achievement and risk. Relentlessly analytical, it refuses emotional transparency. "I'm told I don't have to try to justify love, but I just can't stand the thought of seeming irrationally carried away by emotion" (Oyler, 2021). This refusal is a survival strategy in a culture that weaponizes sincerity. Post-2016, irony became both armor and cage. The narrator admits that people often say her generation values authenticity, but if they do, it is because they have been bombarded since their impressionable preteen years with fakery.

Oyler diagnoses irony fatigue—the exhaustion when every utterance requires triple-layered detachment. The narrator's commentary on her commentary creates a hall of mirrors. She addresses an imagined chorus of ex-boyfriends and parodies her own style. This metafictional layer enacts the condition it describes. The self fragments by design, each layer defending against vulnerability. Conspiracy thinking serves as irony's dark twin. Irony declares "nothing matters"; conspiracy insists "everything is connected, and I alone see it." Both arise from collapsed institutional trust and debased knowledge production. Felix exploits the crisis for sport; the narrator exploits it for narrative control. Her grief upon learning of his "death" is observational. When the faked-death twist arrives, it feels inevitable: performance has swallowed reality. Turkle (2011) illuminates this through the "alone together" paradox. Technology promises connection but delivers simulation, fostering flight from conversation and preference for curated distance. The narrator embodies this: the quieter she became offline, the more vibrant she seemed online (Oyler, 2021). Irony fatigue acts as a protective shell. Long, accumulative sentences mirror the mental labor of self-monitoring.

Reviews praise the voice for seductive confidence and subversive wit while noting its bloodlessness as symptomatic (Mishan, 2021; Rosenfield, 2021). Oyler anticipates objections through metafiction. Conspiracy and irony operate as adaptive strategies in Baudrillard's

hyperreal world, where simulations precede reality (Baudrillard, 1994). The protection costs emotional transparency; sincerity becomes a liability. The narrator's blogging job reveals how moral outrage is commodified, exhausting through hollowness. Oyler makes readers feel this exhaustion while laughing at it, turning the novel into a symptom and critique.

IV. BERLIN: LABORATORIES OF THE PROVISIONAL SELF

The move to Berlin shifts from diagnosis to experiment. Stripped of New York context, the narrator reinvents herself with methodical cynicism. She lies to her employers, claiming to be an accountant. On dating apps, she cycles through zodiac-based personas requiring extensive research: "Already the project was requiring more research than I'd anticipated... the only signature traits I could really recite if pressed corresponded to my own sign" (Oyler, 2021). These experiments literalize Baudrillard's insight that the copy precedes the original. The narrator discovers no "true" self exists independent of performance: "What mattered wasn't who I was but who I appeared to be to others" (Oyler, 2021, p. 178). Offline conversations become curated; embodiment feels optional: "I was starting to feel like my body didn't matter at all, it was just a vessel for the self I projected online" (Oyler, 2021, p. 210).

The Felix twist—his reappearance and admission that he faked his death—serves as philosophical climax. His new account quotes one of her tweets; "He tells her that was the point" (Oyler, 2021). The deception was mutual and mediated. In Berlin's expat bubble, everyone performs; performing badly is the only sin. Oyler's commodification critique sharpens. Attention is currency; visibility is labor. The narrator's former job taught her outrage can be monetized. In Berlin, she monetizes intimacy through fabricated personas. No redemption occurs; the self remains provisional.

Dating profiles demand the eugenicist sidebar of height, body type, and ethnicity (Mishan, 2021). Goffman's impression management intensifies without backstage respite (Goffman, 1959). Turkle's disembodiment is vivid: composites respond to composites. The twist enacts Baudrillard's operational delirium, erasing real/fake binaries (Baudrillard, 1994). Berlin's eerie slate light feels "like it had always just rained, or you had just cried" (Mishan, 2021). No resolution occurs; the self stays dispersed. Critics note how these sequences satirize turning life into content. Oyler forces readers to confront their complicity in impression management.

V. FORM AS FEEDBACK LOOP: ESSAYISM AND THE MIMICRY OF SCROLLING

Fake Accounts employs a self-conscious structure with sections like “Beginning,” “Middle (Something Happens),” “Middle (Nothing Happens),” and “Climax.” The “Middle (Nothing Happens)” adopts fragmented narration the narrator despises—“Why would I want to make my book like Twitter?”—only to abandon it with a meta-commentary on its failure (Oyler, 2021). This stages formal inadequacy, mirroring the feed’s unfulfilled promise of coherence. Prose performs discontinuity through long, accumulative sentences mimicking doom-scrolling. A representative list captures impending doom through nuclear war, the American two-party system, patriarchy, white supremacy, gentrification, globalization, data breaches, and social media (Oyler, 2021). Metafictional devices—direct reader address, ex-boyfriend chorus—disrupt immersion, insisting on interpretive labor (Turtle, 2011).

This distinguishes Oyler from Lockwood. The result feels both inside and outside the feed—critical yet complicit. The structure ironically echoes dramatic arcs while foregrounding artifice. Essayistic digressions replicate scrolling’s associative leaps. Metafiction prevents solipsism, turning critique inward. Form becomes a feedback loop: essayism diagnoses and replicates platform temporality, making readers complicit in fragmented subjectivity. By refusing immersive realism or tidy resolution, Oyler produces a work true to digital existence: restless, self-aware, and addictive.

VI. CONCLUSION

Fake Accounts offers no solutions but precise recognition of the psychological system generated by platforms profiting from fragmentation. Authenticity is not a state but a performance to iterate. Irony and conspiracy are adaptive strategies. The self disperses into feeds and provisional narratives. By rejecting traditional realism and pure autofiction, Oyler crafts the definitive novel of platform modernity. The narrator may seem bloodless, yet the diagnosis pierces. In an era of universal fakery, documenting fakery with clarity is radical. Oyler provides a map of the cage we built and learned to enjoy. The novel stands as both an artifact and critique of the age of feeds.

In the discovery scene, the narrator’s relief upon finding the account reveals how digital deception reframes personal relationships as epistemic contests (Oyler, 2021). Goffman’s (1959) front/back stage collapse explains why Felix’s offline skepticism contrasts so sharply with his online extremism. Baudrillard (1994) further clarifies that conspiracy content operates in the third order of simulacra, where models generate hyperreality without referent. The

Women’s March scene extends this: collective action reduces to performative cosplay, echoing Turtle’s (2011) observation that we expect more from technology and less from each other. Irony fatigue deepens in Berlin experiments. The narrator’s zodiac personas require more research than anticipated, highlighting the labor of self-curation (Oyler, 2021). Each date becomes a test of simulated identity. This embodies Turtle’s illusion of companionship without friendship demands. The faked-death twist completes the loop, proving mortality performative and closing the simulacral circuit.

Formal experimentation in “Middle (Nothing Happens)” parodies fragmented novels while dumping material for reader connection, exposing the hollowness of trendy styles. Long sentences accumulate qualifications mirroring mental drift: one thought spawning subclauses on environmental catastrophe, politics, and social media. Metafiction, including imagined judgments, prevents immersion and enacts the novel’s thesis. Berlin’s liminal quality symbolizes provisional selves in transient spaces (Mishan, 2021). No character achieves growth; all remain dispersed across platforms. Oyler refuses consolation, forcing confrontation with complicity.

Critical reception underscores relevance: the novel captures millennial anxieties about turning life into content while blurring autofiction lines (Mishan, 2021; Rosenfield, 2021). By maintaining critical distance yet operating within feed logic, Oyler produces a text that is diagnostic and symptomatic. Platform modernity thus reshapes inner architecture: sincerity suspect, selfhood provisional, attention currency. *Fake Accounts* maps this terrain with merciless clarity, offering recognition over redemption. The cage is documented; enjoyment acknowledged. In hyperconnected eras, such unflinching anatomy may be the most authentic act possible.

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